

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
WESTERN DISTRICT OF MICHIGAN
SOUTHERN DIVISION

EDAVEON MONTRELL HARRIS,

Plaintiff,

Case No. 1:21-cv-805

v.

Honorable Sally J. Berens

MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF
CORRECTIONS ET AL.,

Defendants.

OPINION

This is a civil rights action brought by a state prisoner under 42 U.S.C. § 1983. Pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 636(c) and Rule 73 of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure, Plaintiff consented to proceed in all matters in this action under the jurisdiction of a United States Magistrate Judge. (ECF No. 8.) Under the Prison Litigation Reform Act, Pub. L. No. 104-134, 110 Stat. 1321 (1996) (PLRA), the Court is required to dismiss any prisoner action brought under federal law if the complaint is frivolous, malicious, fails to state a claim upon which relief can be granted, or seeks monetary relief from a defendant immune from such relief. 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915(e)(2), 1915A; 42 U.S.C. § 1997e(c). The Court must read Plaintiff's *pro se* complaint indulgently, *see Haines v. Kerner*, 404 U.S. 519, 520 (1972), and accept Plaintiff's allegations as true, unless they are clearly irrational or wholly incredible. *Denton v. Hernandez*, 504 U.S. 25, 33 (1992). Applying these standards, the Court will dismiss Plaintiff's complaint for failure to state a claim.

Discussion

I. Factual allegations

Plaintiff is presently incarcerated with the Michigan Department of Corrections (MDOC) at the Carson City Correctional Facility (DRF) in Carson City, Montcalm County, Michigan. The events about which he complains occurred at that facility. Plaintiff sues the MDOC and DRF Correctional Officer Unknown Miller.

Plaintiff alleges that on August 31, 2020, at approximately 2 A.M., Defendant Miller “came into [his] room and touched [his] buttocks” while Plaintiff was sleeping. (Compl., ECF No. 1, PageID.7.) Plaintiff woke and yelled at Defendant Miller, which further woke Plaintiff’s bunkmate.

The next day, Plaintiff pressed the emergency button repeatedly so that he could report the incident with Defendant Miller the prior night. Eventually, Defendant Miller stopped at Plaintiff’s cell. Plaintiff stated that he wanted to report Defendant Miller under the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA), 34 U.S.C. §§ 30301–30309. Plaintiff added he had been pushing the emergency button all day, which hurt his thumb. Defendant Miller allegedly simulated masturbating and told Plaintiff that his efforts would benefit him in the showers.

Plaintiff describes his injuries as “[m]ental-PTSD.” (*Id.*, PageID.8.) He further states that he talked to mental health doctors at the prison, his mom, his aunt, and the PREA hotline.

For relief, Plaintiff seeks \$1,000,000 in damages.

II. Failure to state a claim

A complaint may be dismissed for failure to state a claim if it fails ““to give the defendant fair notice of what the . . . claim is and the grounds upon which it rests.”” *Bell Atl. Corp. v. Twombly*, 550 U.S. 544, 555 (2007) (quoting *Conley v. Gibson*, 355 U.S. 41, 47 (1957)). While a complaint need not contain detailed factual allegations, a plaintiff’s allegations must include more

than labels and conclusions. *Twombly*, 550 U.S. at 555; *Ashcroft v. Iqbal*, 556 U.S. 662, 678 (2009) (“Threadbare recitals of the elements of a cause of action, supported by mere conclusory statements, do not suffice.”). The court must determine whether the complaint contains “enough facts to state a claim to relief that is plausible on its face.” *Twombly*, 550 U.S. at 570. “A claim has facial plausibility when the plaintiff pleads factual content that allows the court to draw the reasonable inference that the defendant is liable for the misconduct alleged.” *Iqbal*, 556 U.S. at 679. Although the plausibility standard is not equivalent to a “‘probability requirement,’ . . . it asks for more than a sheer possibility that a defendant has acted unlawfully.” *Iqbal*, 556 U.S. at 678 (quoting *Twombly*, 550 U.S. at 556). “[W]here the well-pleaded facts do not permit the court to infer more than the mere possibility of misconduct, the complaint has alleged—but it has not ‘show[n]’—that the pleader is entitled to relief.” *Iqbal*, 556 U.S. at 679 (quoting Fed. R. Civ. P. 8(a)(2)); *see also Hill v. Lappin*, 630 F.3d 468, 470–71 (6th Cir. 2010) (holding that the *Twombly/Iqbal* plausibility standard applies to dismissals of prisoner cases on initial review under 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915A(b)(1) and 1915(e)(2)(B)(i)).

To state a claim under 42 U.S.C. § 1983, a plaintiff must allege the violation of a right secured by the federal Constitution or laws and must show that the deprivation was committed by a person acting under color of state law. *West v. Atkins*, 487 U.S. 42, 48 (1988); *Street v. Corr. Corp. of Am.*, 102 F.3d 810, 814 (6th Cir. 1996). Because Section 1983 is a method for vindicating federal rights, not a source of substantive rights itself, the first step in an action under Section 1983 is to identify the specific constitutional right allegedly infringed. *Albright v. Oliver*, 510 U.S. 266, 271 (1994).

III. Sovereign Immunity

Plaintiff may not maintain a Section 1983 action against the MDOC. Regardless of the form of relief requested, the states and their departments are immune under the Eleventh Amendment from suit in the federal courts, unless the state has waived immunity or Congress has expressly abrogated Eleventh Amendment immunity by statute. *See Pennhurst State Sch. & Hosp. v. Halderman*, 465 U.S. 89, 98–101 (1984); *Alabama v. Pugh*, 438 U.S. 781, 782 (1978); *O’Hara v. Wigginton*, 24 F.3d 823, 826 (6th Cir. 1994). Congress has not expressly abrogated Eleventh Amendment immunity by statute, *Quern v. Jordan*, 440 U.S. 332, 341 (1979), and the State of Michigan has not consented to civil rights suits in federal court. *Abick v. Michigan*, 803 F.2d 874, 877 (6th Cir. 1986). In numerous opinions, the Sixth Circuit has held that the MDOC is absolutely immune from a Section 1983 suit under the Eleventh Amendment. *See, e.g., Harrison v. Michigan*, 722 F.3d 768, 771 (6th Cir. 2013); *Diaz v. Mich. Dep’t of Corr.*, 703 F.3d 956, 962 (6th Cir. 2013); *McCoy v. Michigan*, 369 F. App’x 646, 653–54 (6th Cir. 2010). In addition, the State of Michigan (acting through the MDOC) is not a “person” who may be sued under Section 1983 for money damages. *See Lapides v. Bd. of Regents*, 535 U.S. 613, 617 (2002) (citing *Will v. Mich. Dep’t of State Police*, 491 U.S. 58, 66 (1989)); *Harrison*, 722 F.3d at 771. Therefore, the Court dismisses the MDOC.

IV. State Law

In the section of the complaint where Plaintiff must identify the federal rights that Defendants violated, he lists only three MDOC policy directives.

To the extent that Plaintiff raises a state-law claim, he is not entitled to relief under Section 1983. Claims under Section 1983 can only be brought for “deprivations of rights secured by the Constitution and laws of the United States.” *Lugar v. Edmondson Oil Co.*, 457 U.S. 922, 924

(1982). Section 1983 does not provide redress for a violation of a state law. *Pyles v. Raisor*, 60 F.3d 1211, 1215 (6th Cir. 1995); *Sweeton v. Brown*, 27 F.3d 1162, 1166 (6th Cir. 1994).

Moreover, to the extent that Plaintiff alleges a violation of due process, his claim also fails. The elements of a procedural due process claim are: (1) a life, liberty, or property interest requiring protection under the Due Process Clause, and (2) a deprivation of that interest (3) without adequate process. *Women's Med. Prof'l Corp. v. Baird*, 438 F.3d 595, 611 (6th Cir. 2006). "Without a protected liberty or property interest, there can be no federal procedural due process claim." *Experimental Holdings, Inc. v. Farris*, 503 F.3d 514, 519 (6th Cir. 2007) (citing *Bd. of Regents of State Colleges v. Roth*, 408 U.S. 564, 579 (1972)). Courts routinely have recognized that a prisoner does not enjoy any federally protected liberty or property interest in state procedure. *See Olim v. Wakinekona*, 461 U.S. 238, 250 (1983); *Laney v. Farley*, 501 F.3d 577, 581 n.2 (6th Cir. 2007); *Brody v. City of Mason*, 250 F.3d 432, 437 (6th Cir. 2001); *Sweeton*, 27 F.3d at 1164; *Smith v. Freland*, 954 F.2d 343, 347-48 (6th Cir. 1992); *Barber v. City of Salem*, 953 F.2d 232, 240 (6th Cir. 1992).

Plaintiff's claims based on violations of prison policy therefore fail to state a claim.

V. Eighth Amendment

Reading his complaint with all due liberality, *see Haines*, 404 U.S. at 520, Plaintiff intends to allege that Defendant Miller violated rights protected under the Eighth Amendment.

The Eighth Amendment imposes a constitutional limitation on the power of the states to punish those convicted of crimes. Punishment may not be "barbarous," nor may it contravene society's "evolving standards of decency." *Rhodes v. Chapman*, 452 U.S. 337, 345–46 (1981). The Amendment, therefore, prohibits conduct by prison officials that involves the "unnecessary and wanton infliction of pain." *Ivey v. Wilson*, 832 F.2d 950, 954 (6th Cir. 1987) (per curiam) (quoting *Rhodes*, 452 U.S. at 346). The deprivation alleged must result in the denial of the

“minimal civilized measure of life’s necessities.” *Rhodes*, 452 U.S. at 347; *see also Wilson v. Yaklich*, 148 F.3d 596, 600–01 (6th Cir. 1998). The Eighth Amendment is only concerned with “deprivations of essential food, medical care, or sanitation” or “other conditions intolerable for prison confinement.” *Rhodes*, 452 U.S. at 348 (citation omitted). Moreover, “[n]ot every unpleasant experience a prisoner might endure while incarcerated constitutes cruel and unusual punishment within the meaning of the Eighth Amendment.” *Ivey*, 832 F.2d at 954. “[R]outine discomfort is ‘part of the penalty that criminal offenders pay for their offenses against society.’” *Hudson v. McMillian*, 503 U.S. 1, 9 (1992) (quoting *Rhodes*, 452 U.S. at 347). As a consequence, “extreme deprivations are required to make out a conditions-of-confinement claim.” *Id.*

The Sixth Circuit has joined multiple other courts to conclude that even incidents of sexual touching coupled with sexual remarks do not rise to the level of an Eighth Amendment violation so long as the offensive conduct was “isolated, brief, and not severe[.]” *See Rafferty v. Trumbull Cnty., Ohio*, 915 F.3d 1087, 1095 (6th Cir. 2019) (citing *Jackson v. Madery*, 158 F. App’x 656, 662 (6th Cir. 2005), abrogated on other grounds by *Maben v. Thelen*, 887 F.3d 252, 262 n.2 (6th Cir. 2018)); *e.g.*, *Solomon v. Mich. Dep’t of Corr.*, 478 F. App’x 318, 320–21 (6th Cir. 2012) (two “brief” incidents of physical contact during pat-down searches, including touching and squeezing the prisoner’s penis, coupled with sexual remarks, do not rise to the level of a constitutional violation); *Jackson*, 158 F. App’x at 662 (correction officer’s conduct in allegedly rubbing and grabbing prisoner’s buttocks in degrading manner was “isolated, brief, and not severe” and so failed to meet Eighth Amendment standards); *Johnson v. Ward*, No. 99-1596, 2000 WL 659354, at *1 (6th Cir. May 11, 2000) (male prisoner’s claim that a male officer placed his hand on the prisoner’s buttock in a sexual manner and made an offensive sexual remark did not meet the objective component of the Eighth Amendment); *Berryhill v. Schriro*, 137 F.3d 1073, 1075 (8th

Cir. 1998) (where inmate failed to assert that he feared sexual abuse, two brief touches to his buttocks could not be construed as sexual assault); *accord Boxer X v. Harris*, 437 F.3d 1107, 1111 (11th Cir. 2006), *partially abrogated by Wilkins v. Gaddy*, 559 U.S. 34, 37 (2010). However, repeated and extreme incidents may sufficiently state a claim. For example, the Sixth Circuit concluded that a prison officer’s demand that a female prisoner expose her breasts or masturbate in the officer’s presence on six occasions was not “isolated, brief and not severe,” and was sufficiently serious to state an Eighth Amendment claim that survives the defense of qualified immunity. *Rafferty*, 915 F.3d at 1095 (6th Cir. 2019); *see also Seltzer-Bey v. Delo*, 66 F.3d 961, 962–63 (8th Cir. 1995) (allegations that prison guard conducted daily strip searches, made sexual comments about prisoner’s penis and buttocks, and rubbed prisoner’s buttocks with nightstick were sufficient to withstand motion for summary judgment).

If true, Defendant Miller’s conduct toward Plaintiff was reprehensible (and perhaps actionable under state law), but it does not rise to the level of an Eighth Amendment violation. Plaintiff does not allege that Defendant Miller ever touched him beyond the single occasion. Likewise, Plaintiff does not suggest that Defendant Miller’s conduct the following day was coercive in nature. Thus, even in combination with Defendant Miller’s alleged statement and simulated masturbation, the conduct was merely isolated, brief, and not severe. *See Jackson*, 158 F. App’x at 662; *Johnson*, 2000 WL 659354, at *1. The alleged conduct fails to state an Eighth Amendment claim against Defendant Miller. *See Rafferty*, 915 F.3d at 1095. Accordingly, the Court will dismiss Plaintiff’s Eighth Amendment claim against him.

Conclusion

Having conducted the review required by the Prison Litigation Reform Act, the Court determines that Plaintiff’s complaint will be dismissed for failure to state a claim, under 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915(e)(2) and 1915A(b), and 42 U.S.C. § 1997e(c). The Court must next decide whether an

appeal of this action would be in good faith within the meaning of 28 U.S.C. § 1915(a)(3). *See McGore v. Wrigglesworth*, 114 F.3d 601, 611 (6th Cir. 1997), overruled on other grounds, *Jones v. Bock*, 549 U.S. 199, 203 (2007). Although the Court concludes that Plaintiff's claims are properly dismissed, the Court does not conclude that any issue Plaintiff might raise on appeal would be frivolous. *Coppedge v. United States*, 369 U.S. 438, 445 (1962). Accordingly, the Court does not certify that an appeal would not be taken in good faith. Should Plaintiff appeal this decision, the Court will assess the \$505.00 appellate filing fee pursuant to Section 1915(b)(1), *see McGore*, 114 F.3d at 610-11, unless Plaintiff is barred from proceeding *in forma pauperis*, e.g., by the “three-strikes” rule of Section 1915(g). If he is barred, he will be required to pay the \$505.00 appellate filing fee in one lump sum.

This is a dismissal as described by 28 U.S.C. § 1915(g).

A judgment consistent with this opinion will be entered.

Dated: October 12, 2021

/s/ Sally J. Berens
SALLY J. BERENS
U.S. Magistrate Judge